

"All American Girl" and the American Dream

Darby Li Po Price

"[S]hould this sitcom be a success, then I think that we have arrived at hot dog-baseball-American cheese status." —Margaret Cho (Chin A-12)

Great debate has arisen over "All American Girl," the first sitcom on network television to feature an Asian American family. Responses to the show range from ecstatic celebration to condemnation. Guy Aoki, president of Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA), states "we feel 'All American Girl' is positive because it is the first television series to feature an Asian American family . . . in the past, we have been invisible or just purveyors of stereotypes. Seeing ourselves on television gives validity to our existence." In contrast, Bill Wong, *Asian Week* columnist regards the show to be "stupid, inane, and ethnically inauthentic . . . all this show illustrates to this point is that Asian Americans can be part of banal, uninspired entertainment. Equal Opportunity mediocrity" (B. Wong 9). Others have told critics to give the show a break on the grounds that as a sitcom, as Phillip Chung writes, "its main purpose is solely to entertain viewers" (Chung 14). Corin Ramos writes in her letter to the editor "what's wrong with being just funny or entertaining?" (Ramos 10)

While some may argue that the sitcom should be treated as merely entertainment,¹ the many press photos in newspapers, magazines, and *TV Guide* featuring the show's cast mem-

bers posed in front of large American flags suggest intentions beyond mere pleasure. While most of the debate centers around whether the show subverts or reinforces stereotypes and other issues of ethnic authenticity, I find an ideological critique to be a productive means of interpreting the significance of the relationship between representation of Asian Americans on the show and the dominant social order. This essay lays bare overriding ideological assumptions of "All American Girl" to reveal underlying material relationships to larger structures of cultural, economic, and political domination.

The underlying economic motive of network television is to achieve audience ratings worthy of advertisers' support. Network sitcoms are ideologically structured to increase consumer desires and confidence in the American economic system. Espousing the underlying assumptions of the corporate culture that dominates American society, the sitcom has been television's most popular genre for over forty years (Jones 4, 6). According to Darrell Y. Hamamoto, the situation comedy is widely popular to the degree it affirms beliefs in the existence of "freedom, equality, and democracy" in America (Hamamoto 1989: 4). Thus, the sitcom is well suited as a vehicle for dominant ideology.

In spite of democratic ideals proclaiming liberty and justice for all regardless of race or creed, the status of Asian Americans has always been linked to United States' relations with Asian countries. Depending on shifting American political climates towards Asian countries, dominant views towards Asian Americans have historically fluctuated between casting them as threats to the American way of life often enacted through violent attacks and/or forms of exclusion, to public praise for honorable values of hard work, thrift, and family as the "Model Minority." As we near the twenty-first century, the Asian Pacific Rim has gained attention as the area of global economic prominence. At a time of major economic downturn in America, the U.S. has acknowledged the economic necessity to improve relationships with Asian countries. Envisioning the economic promise of a transnationally integrated Asian Pacific region, Ronald Reagan stated in 1984 "the Pacific is where the

future of the world lies" (in Wilson and Dirlik 3).

Accompanying a more positive portrayal of Asia, Asian Americans have been represented in popular media at an unprecedented level over the last year or so, as evidenced by shows such as *"All American Girl,"* *"Vanishing Son,"* and the increase in Asian Americans among other shows. The inception of a situation comedy featuring Asian Americans is particularly significant given the dominant stereotype of Asians as not having a sense of humor. *"All American Girl"* executive co-producer Pat Dougherty recalls how a pitch meeting a few years ago for a similar sitcom to be constructed around an Asian American family was met with "But where are you going to find five funny Asians?" (Southgate 54) While increased exposure is generally thought of as preferable to prior levels of near invisibility, it is important to be aware of not only how images of Asian Americans in shows such as *"All American Girl"* play into the ideology of the American Dream, but the material implications that accompany such ideology in a society organized by systems of racial and class inequality. Antonio Gramsci maintains that elites rule not merely by force but by a "hegemonic culture" of "managed consent" through which existing power relations appear natural and just. A Gramscian perspective allows us to view popular culture as a "terrain of negotiation" where subordinated people's "consent" is secured (Gramsci 263).

Drawing upon Gramsci's conception of "cultural hegemony," a critical analysis of *"All American Girl"* reveals that the show serves as a vehicle for the transmission of a discourse that legitimizes dominant social institutions and power structures. Themes of cultural conflict uphold American culture by associating it with the virtues of freedom, equality, and democracy, and negatively depicting Korean culture as essentially oppositional to such liberties. The tenets of meritocracy and the "Model Minority" myth provide justification for economic inequality. Conflating differences between race and ethnicity serve to deny the significance of racial discrimination in American society.

I begin my analysis with a discussion of how the theme of cultural conflict plays into the American Dream's assumption

that American culture is superior to other cultures.

Cultural Conflict

Portrayals of cultural conflicts between American-born children and their immigrant parents have been sensationalized to mythic proportions as the quintessential American theme. The sensationalization of cultural conflict between American-born children and their immigrant parents has major ideological implications. As Sau-ling C. Wong writes, "The notion of cultural conflict between the immigrant and American born generations—the enlightened, freedom loving son or daughter to escape the clutches of backward, tyrannical parents—is one of the most powerful 'movies' ever created to serve hegemonic American ideology" (Wong 41). Some scholars juxtapose American identity with ethnic identities to argue that anyone regardless of heritage can achieve full status as Americans once they "consent" to disassociate themselves from the ethnic identities and cultures of their "descent" (Sollors 1986). Themes of cultural conflict in "All American Girl" serve American ideology by establishing American culture as progressive and Korean culture as backward.

The first episode of "All American Girl" associates American culture with freedom and Korean culture with authoritarian constraints to such freedom. Much of this is achieved through the narratives of cultural clashes between Margaret, who represents the Americanized daughter, and her mother, who represents traditional Korean culture.

The first scene begins with the Kim family—father, mother, grandmother, and two brothers Stewart and Eric—sitting at the dinner table:

Stewart: "I'm gonna start."

Mother [commanding]: "You will wait until all members of the family are present."

Grandma: "In old country, once sit at table twelve hours waiting for great grandpa Kim to join us. Turn out he died that night. Meal get cold, great-grandfather get cold. Bad day."

The ridiculousness of not eating for twelve hours as they wait for the whole family to arrive suggests that Korean traditions are impractical. However, Stewart must obey the mandates of tradition as expressed by the mother. When Stewart volunteers to go "check on her," their mother sternly responds with, "Stewart, your sister knows what time we eat." Stewart submits to the authority of family tradition: "Of course she does. I'm sorry everyone, I allowed my tummy to take precedence over family tradition." Ethnic culture is portrayed as repressing individual freedom. Juxtaposing Stewart's submission to tradition, Margaret casually walks down the stairs while holding a conversation with her boyfriend on a cellular telephone. Whereas the mother represents authoritarian elements of traditional culture, Grandma reflects backwardness or impracticality by conjuring the ridiculous image of people waiting to eat for twelve hours because of tradition.

As Margaret joins her family for dinner, we find out that her mother disapproves of her dating preferences. When Margaret asks, "Why don't you like Kyle? Is it because he's not Korean?" her mother responds, "No, because he's American." Margaret responds, "I'm American, Eric is American, and even Stewart is American." This exchange portrays Korean culture as exclusive, and American culture as inclusive. The exchange associates American identity with cultural consent and Korean identity with attempts to essentialize ethnicity according to ancestral descent.

Despite assertions that American identity is based on consent rather than descent, the show conforms to American racial stereotypes of Asian men as the Korean men that Margaret encounters are consistently either nerdy or uncompromisingly culturally Korean. When Margaret finally allows her mother to "fix her up" with a "nice Korean boy" named Raymond, Korean culture becomes portrayed as unacceptably paternalistic to Margaret's American way of life. Margaret's mother tells her a Korean girl "must be demure and polite to her man at all times." Considering Margaret's Euro-American friends Ruthie and Gloria to be rude because of their outspoken manners, Raymond tells Margaret: "American girls are going to

say what's on their mind and there's nothing you can do about it." When Margaret responds with "I'm American," Raymond responds "but you'd never do that."

When Margaret has dinner with Raymond's family, the family toasts her with, "May you have the joy that comes from selfless devotion to your husband" and "May you swell with the bounty of many masculine children." Such toasts portray Korean culture as relegating women to the roles of satisfying men and bearing children. Upon returning home with Raymond, Margaret tells him that they will have to stop dating because of their cultural incompatibility. Explaining to Raymond why they are culturally incompatible, Margaret ends with, "I'm opinionated, I say exactly what I think and I don't plan to swell with the bounty of anyone masculine or otherwise. Do you think you could live with that?" Raymond responds, "Not a chance." Here, Raymond affirms beliefs that American and Korean culture are oppositional in terms of gender roles.

This episode supports beliefs that American culture promotes egalitarian gender relations. Portraying Korean culture as extremely paternalistic, the sitcom implies that the image of the Asian woman as submissive is an Asian cultural expectation (rather than Western male fantasy) that women be submissive to male desires. The concept that it is culturally unacceptable for Margaret to "say what she wants" if it counters what Raymond wants to hear provides a direct counter to the "American" tenet of "freedom of speech."

The notion of "saving face" provides another way for the sitcom to associate Korean culture with the suppression of free speech. The plot of one episode centers on the conflict between Margaret's standup comedy that features jokes about her family's "weirdest family values" and the mother's intolerance of such humor. In the final scene, Margaret announces on stage, "I consider myself American. So I think I have the right to say anything I want. But I don't want to make my family feel bad. So I want to apologize, I won't do it again." After her mother is shown smiling in approval, Margaret closes with, "So, anyone else Jewish?" This implies that taking ethnic pride too seriously hinders freedom of speech. The scenario implies that

Koreans are too culturally sensitive to appreciate humor directed towards them.

In accordance with the association of Korean culture with restrictions on occupational freedom, the mother has pre-selected career paths for her children. One episode highlights the conflict between the mother's direction of her children's career choices and Margaret's own preferences. Emphasizing how the mother has made career choices for her children independent of their desires, she presents Margaret with a legal brief and says, "I bought it during the first trimester." After some long soul searching, Margaret decides that she does not want to become a lawyer. Although she doesn't know what she wants to do, she concludes that it will probably be "something more artistic, more creative." Since viewers know that Cho has become a successful comedian in real life, the mother's attempts to determine her career choices seem all the more unfavorable. The show, *a priori*, holds the mother's ethnic point of view to be basically wrong.

By inferiorizing Korean, and by implication other Asian cultures, the show furthers colonial systems of psychological domination. Beyond direct physical force such as genocide, enslavement, or exclusion, colonial power systems rely on psychological dominance that calls for subordinated peoples to give up their group identities. According to Paulo Freire, such psychological dominance is characterized by the acceptance of the dominant group's inferiorization of the subordinated group's culture and identity, and the subsequent attempt of members of the subordinated group to identify with the dominant group rather than their own group (Freire 48-49). Disassociation of subordinated peoples with their ethnic identities supports the dominant paradigm that social status is based on individual merit rather than forms of discrimination. The following section examines how tenets of meritocracy are employed to justify inequalities.

Meritocracy

In the American Dream, success is measured in terms of material wealth. According to the American tenet of equal

opportunity, economic success is achieved on the basis of deserving behaviors such as hard work, intelligence, ingenuity, or thrift. "All American Girl" provides ideological support that American society is such a meritocracy.

Beliefs in meritocracy provide ideological justification for economic inequality on the grounds that people are justly rewarded in accordance to their personal merit. In an episode that takes place at the cosmetics counter where she works, Margaret refers to a temporary worker named Lisa as a "loon." Lisa complains that she can't handle the job and that she should never have switched careers. Margaret mockingly responds, "Lisa, you've had electro-shock therapy—you can't be an air controller anymore." When Margaret says she can't stand Lisa, Gloria says at least Lisa is "better than Courtney, the one that thought the mannequins were telling her to steal." This narrative reinforces the belief that people become situated in the occupational hierarchy according to individual mental capabilities.

Judgments of mental capabilities have historically been used to justify the exclusion of certain racial groups from various sectors of society. Stereotypes of Asian Americans involving imbalances of mental capabilities that give the impression that Asian Americans are socially or culturally inept, have led to discriminations that have resulted in the disproportionately low number of Asian Americans in high level management positions in corporate and political sectors, referred to as the "glass ceiling" (U. S. Commission on Civil Rights).

"All American Girl" projects the notion that Korean Americans prefer to remain at the occupational level of small business owners. In the following exchange occurring after a large corporation called Booktopus offers to buy the family bookstore, the father explains his reluctance to give up the bookstore in return for financial security:

Father: "I'm not sure I like the idea of just walking away from our bookstore. Your mother and I came to this country with nothing. That bookstore represents everything we have become . . .

If we accept this offer, we'll not only be giving up our business, we'll be giving up our home."

Margaret: "Dad, this is the American Dream, I mean, this is why you've worked so hard for thirty years. You've built something of value, and now you can cash in."

Mr. Kim's narrative of a poor immigrant family who became successful in the United States supports the American Dream. However, the father's reluctance to sell the store promotes the popular perception that Koreans remain in small businesses because of cultural preference, or as Mr. Kim says, "I just want to do what is right for the family," rather than because of the widespread discrimination that exists in other areas of employment. Margaret's final statement to the president of Booktopus confirms such sentiments: "This isn't business, this is personal. This isn't about money. It's our store, our business, and our family doesn't want to sell."

The emphasis on maintaining the family tradition of running their small bookstore (which they acknowledge does not make much of a profit) over the promise of greater financial security contributes to the image that Asian culture places family above all else. Another episode takes this line of thought to an extreme when Grandma decides she cannot marry a Korean man who proposes to her because she cannot leave her family. While the family does play a central role in the social and material realms of many Asian American families, the emphasis on family and family businesses are a result of making a virtue out of necessity. As Hamamoto explains, the immigrant Asian family stands at the center of production and provides a haven against discrimination in the larger labor market. Family members provide cheap or unpaid labor to help marginal businesses survive on narrow profit margins (Hamamoto 1994: 218).

In response to the rest of the family's pondering of whether to sell its business, and what they would do with the money, Stewart says, "You could pay off my medical school loans, on the other hand, the money I'm gonna earn as a doctor will make this look like chump change—I don't care what you

people do." Stewart reinforces the mandates of the American Dream by asserting that he is able to attain individual success more quickly by severing himself from his family's ethnic traditions.

The image of the successful self-sufficient small business owner has come to symbolize the ability to realize the American Dream. In one episode, the owner of the bakery across the street tells Mr. Kim, "We small business owners, we need to stick together—we're what America's built on. That and the whole land grab from Indians [laughter] but that's water under the bridge." By placing the historical dispossession of Native Americans in the far off past, it does not pose an impediment to the American Dream. In fact, when portrayed as existing in the far off past (without making connections to the present status of racial groups in America), the acknowledgement of the dispossession of Native Americans poses little threat to current beliefs in the American Dream.

During the recession of the 1980s, the Asian immigrant small business entrepreneur became symbolic of the ability of the self-sufficient minority to attain the American Dream without government assistance. As one component of the Model Minority Myth, the image of the successful Asian American entrepreneur contributes to the common misperception that Asian Americans have overcome all barriers facing them and that they represent a model of success as a minority group. However, "contrary to popular perception that Asian Americans have overcome discriminatory barriers, Asian Americans still face widespread prejudice, discrimination, and denials of equal opportunity" (U.S. Comm. on Civil Rights 190). The exaggeration of Asian American success has been held up by conservatives to argue that racial minorities, including the diverse groups within the Asian American category, do not need governmental assistance to become successful.

Neo-conservatives argue that other racial minorities can become successful if they follow the example of Euro-American and Asian American success. However, the assumption that individuals of different ethnic groups can equally follow the same pattern of success overlooks the crucial role of racism as

well as different economic circumstances in the creation and maintenance of inequality in America (Hamamoto 1994). The following section discusses how the denial and conflation of racial and ethnic specificity supports cultural hegemony and obscures inequalities.

Denying Race and Ethnicity

The American Dream's premise of equality regardless of race or creed maintains consensus by overlooking structural racism and ethnocentrism. In a society where racism and Eurocentrism remain the major organizing principles in a hierarchy of cultural, economic, and political inequality, discussions of race raise controversies. Recognizing the racial nature of debates over stereotypes in *"All American Girl,"* Cho states in an interview, "When you deal with racial identity, you enter a minefield" (Pimental 1). Wishing to avoid being blasted in America's racial "minefield," *"All American Girl"* avoids references to race, racism, and ethnocentrism.

Despite the postscript at the end of each episode that credits the show as being based on the standup comedy of Margaret Cho, the sitcom's acquiescent tone sharply departs from the critical Asian American perspectives of Cho's standup comedy routines. Cho's standup jokes reflect her interview statements that the source of her standup comedy is her "anger" towards white Americans who "make me feel I don't belong" (B. Wong 9). The following indictment of stereotyping exemplifies how Cho directs such anger towards challenging dominant paradigms in her standup comedy. Discussing a television guest appearance where they expected her to speak with an Asian accent because of her appearance and asked her if she could "be a little more Chinese" Cho exclaims:

I was supposed to go on the show and tell jokes, what was I supposed to do? [exaggerated Asian accent with eyes shut]: "My huzband is so fat, that when he sits around to hopaku, he really sit around the hopaku!!! Gong!!!"

I don't understand, I'm constantly being auditioned and offered things I would never do. I'm sorry, I didn't study theater for twelve years just so I could go "Rambo, no!" You know what I'm saying? I mean, I have nightmares where I'm on the set of a horrible sitcom and I wake up screaming, "She's not wearing a wedding veil because she's the kind of bride that comes in the mail!!! Ahhhhhhhhh!!!! (WGBH 1993)

Noticing how the omission of racial and ethnic specific commentary in the sitcom is a clear departure from her standup comedy, Bill Wong observes that "none of Cho's razor-like observations on race, ethnicity and culture was included in her character's dialogue with her parents, siblings or workmates. Except for the obvious physical features of most of the cast, one would be hard pressed to even know this show had Asian sensibilities" (B. Wong 9).

In press discussions about the sitcom Cho emphasizes cultural conflict rather than racism or ethnocentrism as the major theme of concern through statements such as "growing up as an Asian-American can be so trying...you have these two strong cultures battling it out within your life" (in Miller 1D). Diverting our attention from race—what W.E.B. Du Bois has referred to as the major problem of twentieth-century America—"All American Girl" asserts that intra-ethnic cultural conflicts between immigrant parents and American-born children pose the main ethnic issue in American life. George Robinson concludes that in "All American Girl," "the conflicts are the real ones that have faced ethnic Americans for two hundred years" (Robinson E1). The focus on cultural conflict is accompanied by attempts to erase racial and ethnic identification.

Cho has equated the show with the "Bill Cosby Show" and herself to Bill Cosby. "The only thing I can possibly compare it to is the debut of 'The Cosby Show' I'm Bill Cosby" (Carman E1). Just as the "Cosby Show" presented an African

American family that had no vestiges of being African American other than their physical appearance, Jacobs goal is to render the ethnicity of the Kim family invisible: "I would hope that people stop seeing these people as Asian-Americans" "they're just another family that you want to spend time with. Like what happened with 'Cosby'" (Schulberg C1). Perhaps the replacement of the black leather jacket and torn jeans of Cho's standup persona with the miniskirts, tinted brown hair, and thick make-up (as well as the agreement that she lose thirty pounds) for the sitcom are part of the attempt to present Margaret as the type of girl that a mainstream audience would like to spend time with.

An understanding of how Jacobs attempts to conflate ethnicities gives meaning to an episode where Margaret's Jewish American co-worker/friend Gloria performs folksongs as part of a promotional strategy for their bookstore. Margaret applauds the performance with, "A Jewish woman singing Irish folksongs for Korean bookstores—It's so Benetton." Here, Margaret supports the idea that ethnicity is merely symbolic, as in the "Colors of Benetton" advertising campaign where ethnicity is reduced to superficial stylistic commodity fetishes. The episode ends with Ruthie and Margaret singing a folksong with Gloria. Ruthie asks about the meaning of ethnic terms that Gloria has just sung, such as "slap." Ruthie doesn't know. Margaret then says, "I know what 'slap' means," playfully slapping Ruthie in the face and as they all laugh says, "Shut up and keep singing."

This exchange suggests that ethnic specificity is of little importance in the show. Complementary to the American Dream, the Melting Pot approach to diversity seeks to eradicate the importance of ethnic cultures. The episode where the family is trying to teach Margaret how to speak Korean prior to meeting Raymond's traditional Korean family symbolizes how Korean ethnic culture is depicted as obsolete in America. Grandma teaches Margaret how to say "Yankee soldier, want some franks and beans?" in Korean. The message conveyed is that the old country ways are useless in America.

Some Korean Americans, such as John H. Lee, have criticized the show because of its "butchered Korean language and

psuedotraditions," and because only two of the show's eleven writers are Chinese American and none of them are Korean American (Southgate 53). In response to criticism that the sitcom has nothing to do with Korean, Asian, nor Asian American cultures, Jacobs says people are being overly sensitive: "I think people should be uniting behind a show where people are not spouting fortune cookie wisdom. As a Jew, I think I wouldn't care that much if someone's Hebrew pronunciation wasn't quite right" (Southgate 53).

However, equating the misrepresentation of Korean culture with that of Jewish culture in America overlooks how their prominence in television and comedy since its inception may cause Jewish Americans to feel less concerned about their representations in sitcoms. As historian Irving Howe explains, the prominence of Jewish American comedians in television and the accompanying Jewish influence on American humor created an acceptance of Jewish Americans by the larger society to the point where Jewish Americans found it "no longer necessary to be defensive" about what had previously been considered offensive. (in Hamamoto 1994:240)

Similarly conflating differences between the social position of ethnic groups, Mark Lew's letter to the editor is insensitive to Eungie Joo's feelings of "humiliation" in viewing the stereotypes of weak and wimpy Asian men and the Dragon Lady Asian mother figure. Lew asserts that these stereotypes are not "exclusively Asian" and that it would be difficult "to think of a single TV sitcom that doesn't feature at least one wimpy man or dominating woman" (Lew A10).

The limiting of Margaret's sitcom friends to Euro-Americans, and heterosexual at that, contrasts media accounts of how she grew up in "liberal, multicultural" San Francisco, where she "ran around with friends from all kinds of backgrounds" (Miller 1D). Observing the discrepancy, Samuel Cacas asks in his column in *Asian Week*, "Will the non-Asian Pacific American persons she has contact with eventually include Latino Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, Gays and Lesbians? Or will they continue to be European Americans exclusively? Only time will tell just how All-American 'All-

American Girl' will be. So far, All-American means All-European American in Margaret Kim's world" (Cacas 23).

In "All American Girl," ethnic and cultural diversity is depicted as antithetical to the American way of life. Unable to discuss racism because of the need to appeal to a wide audience during conservative political times of the 1990s, the sitcom reinforces neo-conservative justifications for racial and class inequalities. As the "middle" minority, the role of Asian Americans in American politics fluctuates between receiving honorary white status and being scapegoated for America's problems. At a time of increasing racism and racial tensions illustrated by events such as the Rodney King beating and riots in Los Angeles, the racist sentiments of proponents of the "Bell Curve," and xenophobic hostility against people of Mexican descent evidenced by the passing of Proposition 187, "All American Girl" functions to reassure faith in the American Dream's promise of a democratic society characterized by freedom and equal opportunity for all.

As a counterpart to statements that "All American Girl" should be enjoyed and treated as just entertainment, I have focused on the ideological underpinnings and implications of the show. Just as important as whether or not the sitcom perpetuates stereotypes is the recognition of how it serves as a conveyor for tenets of the American Dream that justify cultural, economic, and political inequalities and otherwise obscure pressing social problems relevant to all Americans.



Notes

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1. Debates over whether to judge ethnic humor abstractly as

entertainment versus looking for meanings relevant to larger societal motives parallels major theoretical arguments in the study of ethnic humor. Scholars such as Christie Davies who study the texts of jokes apart from their contexts emphasize the pleasures that arise from abstract intellectual incongruities and conclude that ethnic joke-telling is "an end in itself" and "not as a means to some other end" (Davies 9). In contrast, scholars who emphasize the interconnections between the meanings of humor texts and contexts such as Guillermo Hernandez conclude that when research is conducted ahistorically or without acknowledgement of the complex contexts involved, "the result can only be fragmentary" and "bereft of either meaning or significance" (Hernandez x).



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